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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Over the years, I've taken a lot of various headlines from the news, and focused my commentaries on them. Or, I've reflected about more mundane things, some within my personal life. Yes, the focus of this magazine and its editorials should be more Atari-specific. But, we all know, there's not enough new material in a month, much less weekly, to fill these pages and make it a truly Atari magazine. And to be perfectly honest, many of us have either moved on or supplemented our Atari experience with different platforms or interests. So, we've taken a more logical course and cover news that might be pertinent to the average computer user out there, with Atari roots, past and present.

So yes, my editorial this week will be unrelated to Atari interests. But it will be something different, or at least some thoughts the likes we haven't seen here since around 9/11. Yes, the Virginia Tech tragedy. I realize that most of you, at least in the States, have probably seen quite a bit more of this news that you'd prefer. But, I feel that not to mention it this week would almost be akin to denying that it happened. There is no way to comprehend what has occurred on that Virginia campus. It's unfathomable that something like this could happen, but there's no denying it's possible, and did. It's such a horrific event.

There has been a lot of coverage of this tragedy, and it deserves to be widely covered. This was a massacre - 32 students, faculty, and staff were needlessly and senselessly murdered. There are two things that I don't like about the coverage, however. First, it's unfortunate that this killer succeeded in getting the notoriety that he may have desired. I realize that this cannot be helped; and it's "satisfying" to know that he's not around to "enjoy" the coverage. The second thing is the attempt, intentional or not, to desensitize the news. I've watched numerous local and national coverage. During a lot of the coverage, I've heard some reporters and news anchors refer to this guy as "the gunman" or "the shooter". How about "the murderer"? That's what he is. There will be countless attempts for the "experts" to attempt to figure out why he did this - all speculation, so why bother? Does it matter if he wanted some kind of imagined revenge for some wrong he felt befell him? Does it matter that he may have felt the need to invoke some sort of fantasy power? Who knows truly why he did this. He was a nut case. No psycho-babble by attaching some fancy name to his behavior. 32 people were mercilessly killed. Speculation and rationalizing his motives or frame of mind is pointless. Will this perceived and speculative knowledge stop potential future tragedies? No. Focus on the victims, their friends and families, and the student population at Virginia Tech. They are the ones who need to be remembered and memorialized.

Okay, I got that off my chest. I was tempted to mention other "motives" such as comments made about peer pressure, violence on TV, video game "influences" and other speculative ideas, but those would have opened up far too many more soapboxes to climb.

So, on to more lighter and mundane comments. What an incredible batch of bad weather across the country this past week! Mid-April and people are still getting hit hard with massive snow. Here in the Northeast, we didn't get much snow, but did get hit with a Nor'Easter. Plenty of wind and rain to cause more massive flooding similar to what we got hit with last year at this time. Nothing too bad around here, but plenty of tree branches down. We had some minor water damage due to the way the winds blew the rain around. Some water managed to make its way into our house and cause some ceiling damage in our bathroom. The sun has finally decided to reappear for a change; and the temperatures are finally going to get to or above normal in the next few days. It's starting to look more like Spring. So, I'm beginning to feel a little bit more motivated, and get back to the many projects I still have remaining on my list of things to do. And, it will nice to get back out in the yard or on the golf course without the worry of slogging through the soggy and muddy ground!

So, while you enjoy the nice weather that's fast approaching, remember to take a moment or so to consider what has happened in Virginia and send a prayer to the victims and their loved ones.

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, another week has come and gone and we've gone from one nationwide event to another.

There simply aren't enough messages in the NewsGroup for a column this week, so I'm just going to make a few comments about current events...

Gawd, 'current events'. It seems woefully inadequate to call the carnage at Virginia Tech 'current events', doesn't it? I lost a dear friend during my first semester at college; a suicide. That event left its mark on me, and to this day it pains me that I wasn't there when he could possibly have benefited from my presence. Had someone termed my friend's demise a 'current event', I don't know how I would have felt about it. We all go through that "Holden Caulfield" phase. Some of us spend longer there than others, and some never leave it. I firmly believe that what makes the biggest difference is our friends and family.

Last week's "Imus Affair" is now a memory for most of us, and the terrible horror at Virginia Tech has taken its place. In hindsight, Imus and Rutgers are small potatoes compared to the loss of 33 lives in

such a horrible way.

I’m not going to debate whether or not NBC should have released the pictures and video provided by the perpetrator of this heinous act, but taking into account that I’m a journalist at heart, you can probably guess at which opinion I hold.

I do, however, want to mention something that I find troubling; This ’news on demand’ thing that we are now presented with. It’s disturbing to me for some reason that we can watch things unfold as they happen. Of course, it’s been that way, to at least some extent, since the dawn of the age of radio. Television added another layer, so that we don’t even have to imagine how things look "on the scene". But today we’re inundated with data before we even know what’s really happening. Cell phone video and internet feeds provide us with the ultimate voyeur’s vantage point. We can be safe and sound in our homes or offices and still have the feeling that we’re really there. Forget about violent video games. We can get that adrenaline rush from MSNBC and CNN. We don’t need to buy a video game anymore.

Of course, our hearts go out to the survivors of the massacre and the families of those who did not survive. That goes without saying, but still it must be said. In dark times it’s often the support of those around us that see us through, and right now we’re all one big community.

And yet (and there’s always an "and yet" these days, ain’t there?) there are those who cannot help but interject their own agendas into the situation. Some have taken the opportunity to mention that, had there been stronger gun laws in the state of Virginia, this terrible act might not have occurred. Yet others self-assuredly intone that, had more people on the campus had guns, the massacre might have been minimized, or even averted. Yet others have taken the opportunity to wave the banner for expanded social services and such. There has been no shortage of opinions this past week.

It’s probably not a popular point of view right now, but I’m of the opinion that something bad was going to happen no matter what, and a disturbed mind will find a way to wreak havoc with what’s around it, no matter what. Predestination? Not at all. It’s simply an observation. I’m also wondering... had this disturbed young man had an Arabic or Persian last name, if the government would have sat up and taken notice long ago. Perhaps if he’d been a Quaker...

To sink into ’Arlo mode’... But that’s not what I came to tell ya about. We all know what a terrible event this was. There’s no debating it, there’s no argument. It was a terrible, terrible thing. A waste of our most precious resource... our youth. Who knows what genius might have arisen from within the ranks of those who perished, what insights, what advancements. Even the perpetrator might have, had he chosen a different path, become a beneficial resource, someone who could have provided an advancement that would benefit us all. What a waste. A heartbreaking waste.

Having said that, I need to say that I don’t buy into the idea that, had he received the proper counseling, he could have gotten ’back on track’. There are now stories reaching back for years about attempts to help this individual and get him "well" again. To a large extent, he’d chosen his own destiny well before he bought that Glock 9mm.

To quote an old Okie friend of mine, "Some folks is just what they are. Ain’t nuthin’ else they can be."

If you pray, pray for these families and friends who lost a part of their lives last week. They will heal, slowly to be sure, and perhaps not completely, perhaps scarred, but they will heal. Today, we are all one community, and its important that they know that.

Okay, on to another subject.... Last week’s column. I was taken aback by Dana’s mention of my column last week. It’s true that our editorial comments often complement one another, but I find it amusing that he considers me one of those people who... oh, how did he put it... "who can speak their mind without going off in ten different directions at once"?

For my part, I’ve always admired the way Dana can cut through all the superfluous verbiage and get right to the heart of a discussion. Me? It seems that I have to wrangle around and around a subject before I finally get to the point. Dana, on the other hand, goes right to the heart of the matter and holds it up for all to see. The way I see it, anyone can verbally wander around and around until they stumble onto something that sounds profound. It takes both talent and intelligence to dig right in and get to the meat of a matter right off the bat. I have to wallow around a while until something smacks me in the head once or twice. [grin]

Perhaps that’s why we complement each other so well. Whatever the reason, it seems to work!

[Editor’s note: I just knew that my comments last week, that pertained to Joe’s writing style, was not going to come across clearly! As I wrote last week:

** But, I will go off on a related tangent beforehand - freedom of speech. I like people who are not afraid to speak their mind. It means more if they can do some in an eloquent fashion, rather than just spouting off in ten different directions at once. I don’t know a lot of people who can write this way, and manage to pull it off well. Joe is one of those people who does it well. I do it pretty well, most of the time (he said, patting himself lightly on the back), but not always as fluidly as I’d like. **

My sentence placement was a bit off! I meant to include Joe with those who speak their mind in an eloquent fashion, rather than those who go off in many different directions at once. Sorry for the confusion! While I realize that we both may ramble at times, when we have our "teeth" on a subject, we manage to do well and stay on track. So much for my own eloquence!]

Well folks, that’s it for this week. Thanks again for indulging me. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - A PS3 With More HD Capacity?
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" PS3 Graphics Showcased!
"Exhilarating Escapism"
And much more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Sony May Launch PS3 With Larger Hard Disk Capacity

Sony Corp. said on Tuesday it is considering launching PlayStation 3 (PS3) game consoles with larger hard disk drive capacity, in a bid to cater to the needs of hardcore gamers and other heavy users.

Sony currently offers the basic version of the PS3 with a 20-gigabyte hard disk drive and an advanced model with a 60-gigabyte drive in North America and Japan, but it plans to discontinue the lower-capacity PS3 in North America.

"For users who vigorously store (games and other entertainment content) in the PS3, 20-giga is probably going to be too small, and even 60-giga may not be big enough eventually," Sony Computer Entertainment spokesman Satoshi Fukuoka said.

Sony Computer Entertainment is the video game unit of Sony.

Fukuoka said, however, that potential changes to the PS3 are not limited to its hard disk drive capacity.

"We are not likely to change its core components and functions such as the Cell, RSX, Blu-ray drive and network capability. But outside that realm, addition and deletion is quite possible," he said.

Sony packs the PS3 with its cutting-edge technology including the Cell microchip, dubbed "supercomputer on a chip," RSX graphic processor, and Blu-ray high-definition DVD player.

The advanced functions have driven up PS3's manufacturing costs, and Sony's game unit is estimated to have made a loss of more than 200 billion yen ($1.7 billion) for the year ended March 31, making the game console the biggest risk factor for Sony's earnings growth.

'MotorStorm' Showcases PS3 Graphics

Still wondering just how powerful that pricey PlayStation 3 is? The off-road racing video game "MotorStorm" is a mud-caked showcase of the system's excellent graphics.

This T-rated, $59.99 title approaches the CGI in movies at times. The first time I viewed the game on my high-definition television was one of those "wow" moments as a gamer.

From the photorealistic environments to the impeccable details - like the grit and grime that slowly builds up on the motorcycles, trucks and other vehicles - "MotorStorm" is truly a marvel of the latest in video-game graphics.

My initial few hours of racing were a disaster because I was so enthralled with my surroundings that I wasn’t paying much attention to actual driving.

The vehicles become crumpled heaps of dirty scrap metal after crashes, and the track conditions gradually worsen with muddy ruts that glisten in the sunlight. Clouds of dust and clumps of dirt will sometimes obscure your view.

There’s a price to pay for this hyper-realism: sluggish load times between different tracks and when choosing vehicles.

The racing itself is simple: you have controls to accelerate, brake and steer. Pressing the "x" button provides a short speed boost that’ll send you hurtling forward at nearly uncontrollable velocities.

That’s especially useful after driving off a cliff or smashing into a boulder, which I did quite often until I adjusted to the very sensitive controls. The game will magically give you a new vehicle to resume the race from the crash site, and the boost is a quick way to get back in the race.

As good as it looks, "MotorStorm," feels incomplete.

Like the tracks you’ll compete on, the game is a mix of exhilarating soaring jumps and frustrating mud-bogged crashes.

The racing is pretty simple once you memorize the limited selection of tracks.

There’s no option to save movie clips of you best - or worst - races, the tracks themselves aren’t too different from one another, and there’s no sort of performance shop, for example, where you can customize your vehicle with better parts.

"MotorStorm" also has an interesting premise that’s never explored.

You play as a contestant in the "MotorStorm Festival" in Monument Valley, Arizona.

This mix of Burning Man and motor oil kept me wondering: Who are all these people dancing in the desert? What’s with the giant carnival rides on the horizon?

There’s no way to know. The vehicles and their anonymous, nameless drivers are all we’re supposed to care about.

"MotorStorm" is a visual knockout that I still can’t stop staring at with awe. But look deeper and you might see what this game really is: a series of mindless races with no real point.

Two and a half stars out of four.

Violent Video Games "Exhilarating Escapism"

Players of violent video games believe they are just "exhilarating" escapism which does not desensitize them to real-life mayhem, according to a new survey of one of the entertainment industry's fastest growing sectors.

However, gamers do concede that people "who are already unhinged in some way" may be pushed over the edge if they play violent games obsessively.

Responding to public and political concern about video games, the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) commissioned the survey, interviewing gamers, parents and industry figures about their effect.

The Board, which classifies up to 300 games a year, concluded that for gamers "The violence helps make the play exhilaratingly out of reach of ordinary life."

But it added "Gamers seem not to lose awareness that they are playing a game and do not mistake the game for real life."

Video games tend to polarize opinions like no other entertainment media with some games demonized for their graphic portrayals of violence.

But one survey participant insisted they were not all living in a fantasy world that tempted them to turn violent: "I no more feel that I have actually scored a goal than I do that I have actually killed someone. I know it's not real."

Another gamer said "Sometimes when I get really angry, I go upstairs and play some games and it calms me down."

But some young gamers under the age of 15 said they found some of the violence upsetting. Uncomfortable about the level of gore portrayed in the graphics, they admitted to having nightmares.

That prompted BBFC Director David Cooke to urge parents to be vigilant. He said it was vital to ensure children were protected from games with adult content.

The survey canvassed reaction to a wide range of popular games from Manhunt and Grand Theft Auto to World of Warcraft.

One Manhunt fan admitted "I was quite addicted to it."

"You really were sticking an axe in someone and taking a couple of chops to their neck until their head fell off."

As for the attractions of Grand Theft Auto games, the survey concluded; "The sex makes a contribution to the exhilarating sense of trashing the tedious constraints of everyday life."

But with fast developing technology, today's "cool" game soon becomes outdated.

"It is like when you have a puppy everyone wanted to know you. When it grows a year older, they don’t want to know," one gamer concluded.

Video Game Newcomers Eye More Emotional Range

Jenova Chen and Kellee Santiago, two of video gaming’s hottest independent developers, are tapping new emotions with their games in a bid to give their industry the range to rival Hollywood films.

The duo is off to a strong start. They sold their student game "flOw" - a soothing title where players guide an aquatic creature as it eats and evolves to the beat of ethereal background music - to console giant Sony Corp., which also has the first crack at their next two projects.

"Right now video games are focused on releasing anger and stress...that’s really limited. If you want a deeper understanding of life, you aren’t going to get it from a video game," said Chen, 25.

He and Santiago, 28, arrived on the scene in time to ride a wave of technological change that’s made it easier for hobbyists to create games and share them via the Web.

Not long ago, "it was more prohibitive to make a game than a film," said Jamil Moledina, the executive director of the Game Developers Conference, a trade event.

He noted that independent game makers now have an opportunity to leave their mark without being part of a $20 million team.

Moledina described "flOw" as engrossing and calming and said the game is an example of how the video game business is expanding beyond the genres of shooters, racers and puzzle games.

"They are part of a growing breed of independent developers who are challenging what games are supposed to look like," Moledina said.

The industry’s biggest players are supporting such efforts, giving independents a way to showcase their work.

Sony offers "flOw" on the PlayStation 3’s new online service, which rivals Microsoft Corp.’s Xbox Live gaming platform and Valve’s Steam online download service.

While "flOw" and its predecessor "Cloud" are focused on the Zen end of the emotional spectrum, Chen thinks games should probe the light and dark sides of human emotion.

Knocking the widely held, but scientifically unproven, theory that violent games create violent children, Chen said games give players an emotional outlet not available in day-to-day life by letting them laugh, experience an adrenaline rush, or work out aggressive and violent feelings.

Earlier this year, Chen’s team and other finalists pulled out of the Slamdance Guerrilla Gamemaker Competition to protest organizers’ decision to cut "Super Columbine Massacre Role Playing Game" from the list of finalists.

Players of that downloadable game, which uses simple graphics reminiscent of the early arcade era, adopt the roles of the teens who killed 13 people and then themselves at Columbine High School nearly eight years to the day of this week’s shooting rampage at Virginia Tech.

Chen said the game is "disturbing," but wondered whether it would have faced the same hurdles if it had been a film.

"It’s like a new style of documentary," he added.

Danny Ledonne, creator of "Super Columbine Massacre," predicted that artists will tackle the Virginia shootings in a variety of ways.

"I do not believe the medium of interactive electronic media should be excluded from exploring the sorrows and challenges of the human experience," Ledonne wrote on his site.

Old-School Games In "Barcade" Renaissance

In Brooklyn’s warehouse-turned-artist district of Williamsburg, young hipsters flock to Barcade to sample its roster of microbrews and mingle with the likes of Pac-Man, the Mario brothers and Frogger.

Walls of the bar, which runs on wind power and has its own MySpace profile, are lined with dozens of bulky, old-school arcade games that decades ago lured coin-clutching teens to crowded, dark rooms with deceptively addicting game play.

Barcade’s popularity among Williamsburg’s 20- and 30-somethings reflects a wider trend in the video game industry - "retro" games are back as parents introduce their offspring to the beloved games of their youth.

Few segments of the $30 billion global video game market needed it more than the U.S. arcade business, which has shrunk to about a quarter of its peak size.

In the heyday of the mid-1980s there were more than 10,000 arcades in the United States and about 1.4 million games placed in myriad locations from teen-mobbed mall arcades to convenience stores, said Michael Rudowicz, president of the American Amusement Machine Association.

The number of arcades shriveled to about 2,500 during the industry’s nadir roughly four years ago on the heels of skyrocketing shopping mall rents and competition from console gaming.

The count of U.S. arcades now stands at about 3,500 as "Pac-Man," "Asteroids," "Tron," "Centipede" and other stars of the golden age of arcade gaming ride a comeback wave unseen since the start of Sony’s PlayStation home console era.

"It’s quite a resurgence," said Rudowicz.

Nostalgia is not alone in fueling the rebound, which is also getting a lift from corporate layoffs that forced some middle managers to reinvent themselves as operators of family entertainment centers.

Talented game makers, who were wooed by big-budget console game studios, are also returning to their roots - having grown weary of hulking, high-risk projects and assembly-line specialization.

Among them is former Midway Games Inc. designer Eugene Jarvis, who founded game maker Raw Thrills in 2001 and has since turned out coin-operated hits like "The Fast and the Furious" driving game and "Big Buck Hunter Pro" - a game that introduced trendy urbanites to hunting.

"Big Buck" was last year's top arcade game, selling 7,000 units, said Ryan Cravens, marketing manager for Betson Enterprises, which distributes arcade games and has a partnership with Raw Thrills.

National chains like AMC Theaters, child-focused U.S. restaurant franchise Chuck E. Cheese and bowling alley operator Brunswick offer a steady rotation of arcade games, including Japan's popular import "Dance Dance Revolution."

Nolan Bushnell, founder of the original Atari game company and Chuck E. Cheese, last year opened a swanky restaurant with video-game equipped tables in a suburban Los Angeles shopping mall. His new target audience is the adult dating set.

Bushnell and other seasoned arcade industry players say Generation Y, which includes individuals as old as their late 20s, is discovering arcade gaming's mix and mingle mode.

"The Y generation communicates by word of mouse," said Rudowicz said. "It's cool to get out to play with your peers."

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Apple II Turns 30

The news out of Cupertino, California, was mostly dour last week, as Apple Inc. announced that it was delaying the delivery of the next version of its OS X operating system by four months so that it could complete work on the iPhone cell phone.

That news elicited groans from the legions of Apple and Mac fan sites. They have been eager fans of early Leopard test builds, especially as the OS is still reportedly plagued by a number of high profile bugs in applications such as QuickTime and Safari, and because rumored "big features" have yet to see the light of day, making Leopard a modest improvement over the previous OS X release, dubbed "Tiger," which came out in 2005.

The delay will also mean that Apple misses the opportunity to debut the update at its annual Worldwide Developers Conference in June.

Apple’s uncharacteristic stumbling over OS X might seem even more awkward come Monday as the world’s thoughts turn back 30 years to a long-distant computer conference and a triumphant moment in the life of a company that has seen big wins and big losses: the introduction of the Apple II computer at the first ever West Coast Computer Faire in San Francisco.

Born 30 years ago, the Apple II was not created in a garage as myth would have it. Apple II was a follow-up to a market flop, the Apple I. The failure of that first effort was a blessing. The added time, plus new semiconductor technology that became available in the interim between Apple I and Apple II, made it possible for co-founder and resident engineering genius Steve Wozniak to rework the machine’s design. Apple II stood out with a color display, eight expansion slots, a documented and user-accessible logic board, sound, and game controller ports. Apple II had more in common with commercial arcade games than with competing home computers of the day. That’s no coincidence; Wozniak and Jobs worked together on Atari’s Breakout game, and Breakout was one of Apple II’s signature games.

Apple II’s aesthetics showed the first evidence of Steve Jobs’ influence. Like competitors’ systems at the time of its release, the initial Apple II used a cassette recorder for storage and sometimes called for the use of arcane debugger-like commands for simple tasks. But Jobs’ notion that an unimposing enclosure and high-quality documentation would make the product accessible to ordinary consumers clicked. Apple II almost immediately became the box to beat in the home market, and it maintained that status even after IBM mixed its starched shirt attitude, office equipment background, and revered name to create the very impersonal but very successful PC in 1981.

Apple continues to make systems that make new and seasoned users, kernel hackers, and commercial artists feel at home while they’re working. Apple is the constant brunt of derision for its adherence to the original Apple tenet that is the reason for its success: Technology should be equal parts leading edge and enjoyable to use. Some things are sadly lost to time; Intel-based Apple computers are no longer supreme inventions in the tradition of Apple II. And, following the success of the iPod, Apple’s attentions are now spread across devices, software, and services. But who knows? If Apple is willing to take the big risks that helped shape technology as we know it, we may wake one morning to find that it’s 1977 all over again.

Yahoo Introduces PayPal

Yahoo Inc. has expanded its recently upgraded Web search advertising system overseas and added an online payments service as part of its partnership with eBay, Chairman Terry Semel said on Tuesday.

Speaking to investors on a conference call following first-quarter results, Semel said Yahoo had offered its recently upgraded Panama Web search advertising system to key Japanese customers, expanding on the initial U.S. debut of Panama in February.

He said fuller international expansion of Panama would occur over the next several months, including European and South Korean markets by the end of the current quarter.

"While we're still in the early days, we've already seen significant increases in the relevance of our most prominent sponsor search ads and have heard from our advertisers that they are seeing meaningful improvements in ad performance," Semel said.

He said Yahoo also expanded the U.S.-focused partnership it struck with online auction leader eBay Inc. nearly a year ago by offering a "PayPal checkout program" - taking aim at rival Google Inc.'s Google Checkout.

The PayPal checkout program is aimed providing merchants and advertisers a streamlined transaction checkout process and improved conversion of window shoppers into buyers among active Yahoo shoppers, Semel added.

Virginia Tech and a Web of Grief

Every culture has its rituals for grieving: Jews sit shiva, the Irish throw a wake, and in New Orleans, the funeral procession is often led by an uplifting jazz band. For the members of the iGen, the infinitely connected teens and twenty-somethings who cannot remember a time when the World Wide Web didn't exist, the ritual of mourning is now a social-networking phenomenon. Welcome to Grief 2.0.

Within minutes of the news of the shootings at Virginia Tech University on Monday, students on the campus turned to sites like Facebook and MySpace to reassure friends and family that they were unharmed, and to share their feelings about the tragic event. As of Thursday morning, a search on Facebook for "Virginia Tech" groups turned up more than 500, the majority expressing condolences and offering prayers for the victims and survivors of the shootings.

The most active group, "A tribute to those who passed at the Virginia Tech shooting," has nearly 290,000 members; the group's "wall," where members can post brief messages, has nearly 16,000 entries from all over the world.

And there were still more expressions of grief posted to the group: thousands of images depicting the Virginia Tech logo with those of colleges around the country, set against the backdrop of a maroon remembrance ribbon; and a discussion board with over a thousand different topics, many listing hundreds of different entries.

The wall posting of group member Angie Platt reflected the sentiments of many others: "My thoughts and prayers are with all of those who lost someone they love at Virginia Tech. The whole nation and people across the world are crying and mourning with you." High school student Emily Ann Ferguson agreed: "im feel so sorry for the families of those who died..... its so sad :("

Others chose to express their sorrow through video clips that they posted on YouTube. The site lists more than 6,000 video clips related to "Virginia Tech" -- a number that rose by several hundred while this story was being written. A significant number are segments from news broadcasts about the shootings, but there are also many original contributions.

A 26-year-old Britain named Enkï¿‰, for instance, composed a song, "God Bless Your Family (A Song For Virginia Tech)," and posted his performance of it to YouTube. "I wrote this song today," he said, "whilst watching

coverage of the devastating events that took place on Virginia Tech Campus. God Bless the families of those lost on April 16th, 2007 at Virginia Tech." His performance has been viewed nearly 120,000 times.

Others, like the 19-year-old Tony and the 15-year-old Leon, took the opportunity to post video blog entries talking about the event and their reaction. Another popular type of posting are video mashups or "retunes" of various songs in tribute to Virginia Tech and its students.

In looking at some of the video postings and even some of the Facebook entries, it is clear that the relative anonymity of the Web also permits the expression of sentiments that would never be spoken in a funeral parlor.

In the Facebook group "A tribute...," for instance, there are threads with the heading "Enough with the Racism!," "The Terrorist A-Hole," and a discussion of the "Death threats to the man who sold Cho the gun," among many, many others.

In relatively short time, the conversations in the threads veered from the tragedy itself into the long-standing and divisive public-policy debates about immigration, gun control, and mental health. Sadly, despite the evident shared grief for what happened, some posters showed little reluctance to criticize or even insult their fellow students.

Trojan Horse Uses Virginia Tragedy as Bait

Spammers and hackers are using the slayings at Virginia Tech as a gory lure to infect computers with malicious software, security experts noted Thursday.

While the video made by gunman Cho Seung-hui prior to the killing of 33 people on Monday was widely posted on news Web sites and YouTube.com, spam e-mails were intercepted Wednesday night purporting to link to the footage on a Brazilian Web site, said Graham Cluley, senior technology consultant, at security vendor Sophos PLC.

If clicked, the link caused a computer to automatically download a malicious screensaver, called TERROR_EM_VIRGINIA.scr by Sophos, which installs a Trojan horse program that collects banking details, Cluley said.

It’s unclear yet what banks the Trojan is engineered to exploit, Cluley said. Sophos has posted a screenshot of the spam.

The e-mails are unlikely to mean much to English speakers since they’re written in Portuguese, Cluley said. But hackers have repeatedly used breaking news events to try to trick users into opening malicious programs.

"We might see other hackers jump on the coattails of this," Cluley said.

After emergencies and disasters, fraudulent Web sites purporting to collect charity money also tend to emerge. So far, more than 450 domain names related to the Virginia Tech shooting have been registered that look questionable, wrote Johannes Ullrich, chief technical officer for the Internet Storm Center, part of the SANS Institute, which monitors the

health of the Internet.

The registrations have occurred at a faster pace than ones after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in August 2005, Ullrich wrote on Monday.

SANS has posted a list of suspicious domains and their status. Virginia Tech has has set up an official site with information on a memorial fund.

The U.S. Computer Emergency Response Team warned on Tuesday it's likely some of those domains could turn into phishing sites.

Earlier in the week, eBay Inc. canceled auctions trying to sell domains related to the Virginia Tech shootings, with one listed at US$49,930.

OLPC Laptop Shipments Delayed

Shipments of the XO notebook PC for the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) project will likely be delayed until the third quarter, the manufacturer said Friday.

Quanta Computer Inc., the world's largest contract laptop PC manufacturer, had earlier predicted shipments could start as early as July, but software adjustments by the OLPC group have pushed the schedule back to the third quarter.

"The hardware is pretty much in place," a company representative said.

The company has already said it has confirmed orders for 1 million of the laptops. Several nations have already signed up for the project, including Argentina, Brazil, Libya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Uruguay.

The OLPC project is aimed at ensuring children around the world don't miss out on learning how to use computers. The fear is that the high cost of computers is keeping too many people in developing countries from learning how the software, Internet and communications benefits of computing can improve their economies, job prospects and lives, a conundrum commonly referred to as the digital divide.

The group has worked on building a laptop PC, the XO, that costs just US$100, including hardware and software, and comes with a battery recharger and wireless network interface. In many countries where OLPC hopes to distribute the XO, electricity and Internet access are bigger problems than the lack of PCs.

The laptop is also built to last under rough conditions. It's resistant to water, and there are as few moving parts as possible. Instead of a hard disc drive, for example, which has moving parts, the XO uses flash memory. It's also designed with a tougher outer shell than most laptop PCs, and drop tests have been performed to ensure the device can survive a few falls. A full list of the hardware specifications shows it also has a Secure Digital memory card slot, three USB ports, and an onboard camera.

There are critics of the program. Fair International, a Norwegian nonprofit organization also working to provide PCs to schools in developing countries, complains that the OLPC model of ensuring every schoolchild receives their own laptop is simply too costly. In addition, some companies argue that the PC should be equipped with the most widely

used software, because that way, kids in developing countries would learn a job-related skill through the machines. Instead, the XO is equipped with a newly developed user interface running on a stripped-down version of Red Hat Inc.’s Fedora Core Linux OS.

Still, the OLPC project has found a large number of supporters from different walks of life. Many top members of the group are from academia and work at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The project is led by Nicholas Negroponte, a co-founder of MIT’s Media Laboratory. And from industry, Advanced Micro Devices Inc., Red Hat and Google Inc. are just a few of the companies that have joined the initiative.

Mozilla Releases Thunderbird 2.0

Over the past year, Mozilla’s open-source Firefox browser has been slowly but steadily nibbling away at the overwhelming dominance of Microsoft’s Internet Explorer. According to the Web analyst firm Net Applications, Firefox had 15 percent of the browser market in March 2007, five percentage points more than a year ago. All of the increase has come at the expense of Internet Explorer.

Now Mozilla is hoping that its e-mail client will make similar inroads into the market share of Microsoft Outlook. On Thursday, the company released Thunderbird 2.0, the updated version of its popular open-source e-mail client.

In a press release announcing the new version, Scott MacGregor, Thunderbird’s lead engineer, said that "Thunderbird 2 has powerful new features and proven security, delivering an improved e-mail experience to users worldwide."

The program’s security enhancements focus on three specific types of problems: phishing, privacy, and spam. The e-mail program will pop up a warning when a message requests personal information, and also will warn users if they are being redirected to a domain other than the one that sent the message.

Thunderbird automatically blocks remote images in messages, which can be used to harvest e-mail address, and uses multiple filters to help eliminate spam.

One of the most highly touted new features of Thunderbird 2.0 is the ability to apply tags to individual messages to make them easier to find and organize.

"In Thunderbird 2, we incorporated the proven benefits of tagging to email," McGreggor said. "Tagging initially gained popularity on blogs, photo, and link-sharing sites as an intuitive way to organize online information so users could easily find desired content."

The program comes with several default tags (Important, Personal, To Do, Later), but users can create their own. Multiple tags can be applied to each message, making it easy to sort information in several ways.

Even without tags, Mozilla is trying to make it easier for users to sift through their growing volumes of e-mail by offering improved search capability. As soon as users start typing in the program’s search bar,

results begin appearing in the message pane. Users can save their searches in a special folder to speed the process even more.

In addition to adding tagging and improved searching, Mozilla has implemented a "message history navigation" feature that gives users the ability to click "forward" and "back," much like users do in surfing Web pages.

Thunderbird's target is clearly Microsoft's Outlook e-mail program, much as Firefox has taken aim at Internet Explorer. In the business community, Thunderbird's ability to make inroads on Outlook has been hampered by Outlook's integration with Microsoft's enterprise-level Exchange server, but Thunderbird has had more success in the personal e-mail market. According to published reports, Thunderbird has been downloaded over 40 million times, even before the most recent upgrade.

One new feature of Thunderbird that is likely to be popular is its ability to integrate with Google's Gmail program. With the appropriate user ID and password, Thunderbird can seamlessly retrieve messages from Gmail and use the online service to send e-mail directly from the Thunderbird client.

As some commentators have pointed out, linking Thunderbird 2.0 to Gmail is a convenient way to maintain a backup of messages stored in Gmail's servers. However, while any message sent from Gmail can be synchronized in Thunderbird, the reverse is not true; a message sent from the Thunderbird client, even using a Gmail account, will not show up later online in Gmail.

Fee For '.org,' '.info' Names To Jump

Wholesale prices for Internet addresses ending in ".org" and ".info" are going up 2.5 percent in mid-October, about the same time fees for ".com" and ".net" are increasing.

Public Interest Registry, which runs ".org," announced the increase in a letter Wednesday to the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, the Internet's key oversight agency. Afilias Ltd., which runs ".info," disclosed its plans last week.

The per-name fee is what PIR and Afilias collect annually from registrars, the companies that sell domain names on their behalf. Such charges are generally incorporated in the prices companies, groups and individuals pay to register names, and they apply to new registrations, transfers and renewals.

An increase of up to 10 percent a year was authorized under ICANN's latest contracts with PIR and Afilias, both dated Dec. 8. PIR and Afilias chose to increase fees by 15 cents, or 2.5 percent, to $6.15.

The ".org" increase takes effect Oct. 18, and ".info" on Oct. 15.

Earlier this month, VeriSign Inc. announced it would increase the annual fee for ".com" by 7 percent to $6.42, and the ".net" fee by 10 percent to $3.85. VeriSign said the fee increases, coming Oct. 15, stem from a need to keep up with growing online use as well as threats from hackers.

PIR and Afilias did not cite a reason in their letters to ICANN.

The ".org" suffix is the world’s fourth most popular domain name, and ".info" ranks No. 6, but both pale in registrations compared with ".com." The ".info" suffix was one of seven ICANN approved in 2000 in the first major expansion of Internet addresses since the system was created in the 1980s.

Google Dumps ’Froogle’ Brand Name

Google trashed efforts at clever word play this week by changing the name of its shopping search engine from "Froogle" to the more corporately inclined Google Product Search.

The name was originally intended as a play on the word "frugal", Marissa Mayer, vice president of search and user experience, and Jeff Bartelma, product manager for "the product formally known as Froogle", wrote in a blog post to the Google Web site.

But it appears that the Froogle moniker puzzled even the most tech savvy Internet user. "The name caused confusion for some because it doesn’t clearly describe what the product does," Mayer and Bartelma wrote.

So lest the online masses think Froogle was a new breakfast cereal, a "Fraggle Rock" spin-off or the latest video game, Froogle was sacrificed to the re-branding gods and has emerged as Google Product Search.

The revamp now also makes it easier to purchase items via Google Checkout, according to the executives. At this point, however, there are no plans to change what is actually offered on the site.

Cookie Crunching May Be Pumping Up Web Traffic

Internet cookies might not be as reliable an indicator of distinct Web site visitors as previously thought, according to a Monday report from Internet research company comScore.

A growing number of Internet users have taken to erasing their computer’s cookies, which are unique identifiers inserted on a user’s computer that reveal what Web sites someone has visited. While this might not seem like a catastrophic event, the deletion of these cookies could lead to inflated traffic reports for a particular Web site, according to the report.

Each time a user visits a Web site for the first time that Web site deposits a virtual checkmark, or cookie, onto the user’s computer. That cookie prevents the Web site from cataloging repeat visits from the same user, thereby creating a more accurate count of new visitors to a particular online venue. If a user’s cookies have been erased, however, that person’s computer is registered as a new user when they visit a Web site, even if they have been there hundreds of times before.

ComScore evaluated a first-party Web site and a third party ad server that each receives more than 100 million hits each month.

Researchers found that 31 percent of U.S. Internet users erased their

first-party cookies over the course of the month. As a result, Web sites could be inflating their web traffic by as much as 150 percent, according to comScore.

"These ’serial resetters’ have the potential to wildly inflate a site’s internal unique visitor tally, because just one set of ’eyeballs’ at the site may be counted as 10 or more unique visitors over the course of a month," said Magid Abraham, president and chief executive of comScore, in a statement. "The result is a highly inflated estimate of unique visitors for sites that rely on cookies to count their audience."

Report authors found similar totals on the third-party ad server, with approximately 27 percent of users clearing their cookies at least once a month.

Many people think third-party cookies are deleted more often than first-party cookies because "many PC users reset or delete their cookies using security protection programs," Abraham said. "But these findings suggest that selective cookie management is not prevalent."

State Department Got Mail - And Hackers

A break-in targeting State Department computers worldwide last summer occurred after a department employee in Asia opened a mysterious e-mail that quietly allowed hackers inside the U.S. government’s network.

In the first public account revealing details about the intrusion and the government’s hurried behind-the-scenes response, a senior State Department official described an elaborate ploy by sophisticated international hackers. They used a secret break-in technique that exploited a design flaw in Microsoft software.

Consumers using the same software remained vulnerable until months afterward.

Donald R. Reid, the senior security coordinator for the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, also confirmed that a limited amount of U.S. government data was stolen by the hackers until tripwires severed all the State Department’s Internet connections throughout eastern Asia. The shut-off left U.S. government offices without Internet access in the tense weeks preceding missile tests by North Korea.

Reid was scheduled to testify Thursday at a cybersecurity hearing for a House Homeland Security subcommittee. He was expected to tell lawmakers an employee in the State Department’s Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, which coordinates diplomacy in countries including China, the Koreas and Japan, opened a rigged e-mail message in late May giving hackers access to the government’s network.

The chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., said hackers are no longer considered harmless, bored teenagers. "These are experienced, sophisticated people who are trying to exploit our vulnerabilities and gain access to our information," Thompson said.

Reid was not expected to disclose the identities or nationalities of the hackers believed to be responsible for the break-ins or to disclose whether U.S. authorities believe a foreign government was responsible.

The department struggled with the break-ins between May and early July.

The panel's chairman, Rep. James R. Langevin, D-R.I., called cybersecurity an often-overlooked line of defense. "Since much of our critical infrastructure is dependent on computers and networks and is interconnected and interdependent, a cyberattack could disrupt major services and cripple economic activity," Langevin said.

The mysterious State Department e-mail appeared to be legitimate and included a Microsoft Word document with material from a congressional speech related to Asian diplomacy, Reid said. By opening the document, the employee activated hidden software commands establishing what Reid described as backdoor communications with the hackers.

The technique exploited a previously unknown design flaw in Microsoft's Office software, Reid said. State Department officials worked with the Homeland Security Department and even the FBI to urge Microsoft to develop quickly a protective software patch, but the company did not offer the patch until Aug. 8, roughly eight weeks after the break-in.

Microsoft said it works as quickly as possible to provide customers with security updates.

"If we release a security update that is not adequately tested, we could potentially put customers at risk, especially as the release of an update can lead to reverse-engineering the fix and lead to broader attacks," said Microsoft's senior security strategist, Phil Reitinger. "Updates must be able to be deployed by customers with confidence."

At the time, Microsoft described the software flaw as "a newly discovered, privately reported vulnerability" but did not suggest any connection to the U.S. government break-in. It urged consumers to apply the update immediately. It also recommended that consumers not open or save Microsoft Office files they receive from sources they don't trust or files they receive unexpectedly from trusted sources.

The State Department detected its first break-in immediately, Reid said, and worked to block suspected communications with the hackers. But during its investigation, it discovered new break-ins at its Washington headquarters and other offices in eastern Asia, Reid said.

At first, the hackers did not immediately appear to try stealing any U.S. government data. Authorities quietly monitored the hackers' activity, then tripwires severed Internet connections in the region after a limited amount of data was detected being stolen, Reid said.

Reid also complained the State Department's efforts to deal quietly with the break-in were disrupted by news reports. The Associated Press was first to reveal the intrusions.

"We were successful here until a newspaper article telegraphed what we were dealing with," Reid said.

House Panel Approves Anti-Spyware Bill

Legislation that would help protect consumers from harmful spyware that can harvest personal data from a user's computer was approved on Thursday by a

U.S. House Energy and Commerce subcommittee.

Spyware invades computers as users browse certain Web sites, resulting in repeated intrusive and aggressive advertisements. Some spyware programs can also steal addresses, telephone numbers or credit card information without the knowledge of the computer user.

"Protecting Internet users from dangerous programs that steal consumers' identities, invade their software or just plain harass them is a top priority," said Democrat John Dingell of Michigan, chairman of the full committee.

The bill would require software distributors and advertisers to clearly notify and obtain consent from consumers before their programs can be loaded onto a computer. Violators could be fined up to $3 million for each unfair or deceptive act.

The Energy and Commerce Committee's panel on commerce, trade and consumer protection approved the bill on a voice vote. It plans to hold a May hearing on computer data breaches at retailer TJX Cos. Inc., which recently reported information was stolen on more than 45 million credit and debit cards.

The legislation next moves to the full committee for consideration.

Lawmakers Grill US Agencies on Cyberattacks

Lawmakers expressed concern Thursday that multiple U.S. agencies whose networks were hacked recently can't be sure they've fixed their vulnerabilities because of poor cybersecurity practices.

Several agencies haven't completed inventories of their IT equipment, and can't know how badly they've been compromised, said Representative James Langevin, a Rhode Island Democrat, during a hearing of the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Emerging Threats, Cybersecurity, and Science and Technology.

"We don't know the scope of our networks," said Langevin, chairman of the subcommittee. "We don't know who's inside our networks. We don't know what information has been stolen. We need to get serious about this threat to our national security."

Cybersecurity officials from the U.S. Department of State and Department of Commerce assured lawmakers that they fixed the holes that led to network intrusions in 2006. "We felt pretty confident we had a good plan in place," said Donald Reid, senior coordinator for security infrastructure in the State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security.

Reid described an attack on the State Department's unclassified network in May 2006. An agency employee in the Far East opened an e-mail containing a Microsoft Word attachment with an exploit code hidden inside it, he said. At the time, there was no patch available, Reid said.

The malicious code established backdoor communications outside the agency's network, using a Trojan horse, he said. But the State Department's intrusion detection system immediately detected the problem, and the agency's incident response team used a temporary wrapper to

protect systems against the vulnerability, Reid said.

The attackers took advantage of a "zero-day" exploit, Reid said. "We're in new territory," he said. "We're trying to learn as we go along."

Although Reid assured the subcommittee that the State Department's unclassified and classified networks are separate, Langevin said neither the State nor the Commerce department have completed an inventory of their networks. Both agencies received F grades in cybersecurity in scores released by Congress last week, he noted.

The inspector general's office at the State Department said in 2006 the agency had inventories less than 50 percent of its IT systems, Langevin said. If the agencies haven't completed an inventory, "then they can't know for certain these incidents don't involve the classified networks," Langevin said.

But Reid said the State Department has now completed an inventory on "far more than 50 percent" of the agency's IT equipment. The classified and unclassified networks are separate, he said. "We're very confident there's no bleed over," he added.

Subcommittee members also questioned how the Commerce Department could not pinpoint the date of an attack the agency discovered in July 2006. The agency wasn't able to recover the firewall logs earlier than eight months before it discovered three agency computers attempting to access unauthorized resources, said David Jarrell, manager of the critical infrastructure protection program in the agency's office of chief information officer.

The agency "cannot clearly define the amount of time the perpetrators were inside its... computers before their presence was discovered," Jarrell said.

The agency "has no evidence to show that data was lost," he added.

Representative Bob Etheridge, a North Carolina Democrat, called Jarrell's testimony "troubling on many levels to me."

The hearing is a good first step toward recognizing that many U.S. agencies have been victims of cyberattacks, said Alan Paller, director of research at the SANS Institute, a security research and training company in Maryland. The U.S. government and key defense contractors are under "continuous and increasingly sophisticated attacks" from other nations, Paller said.

"The attacks work," he added. "Penetrations are deep and broad. Terabytes of highly sensitive information have been stolen and systems are under the control of the attackers. Many agencies do not even know how many of their computers are under the control of foreign nation-states."

With the federal budget tight, the best option is for the federal government to pressure IT vendors to bake security in to products, Paller said.

Google Rivals Urge Antitrust Scrutiny of Deal

Internet and media rivals to Google Inc., fearing an unprecedented consolidation of power in the online advertising market, are expected to urge regulators to closely scrutinize the Web search leader's $3.1 billion deal to buy DoubleClick Inc.

Google on Friday beat out Microsoft Corp. and Yahoo Inc. to buy Web ad supplier DoubleClick, securing a leadership position as the Internet's top advertising business.

Microsoft, the world's largest software maker, said the deal would allow Google to corner the online advertising market and provide them access to a huge amount of information on consumer behavior on the Internet.

"This proposed acquisition raises serious competition and privacy concerns," said Brad Smith, Microsoft senior vice president and general counsel in an e-mail statement.

"We think this merger deserves close scrutiny from regulatory authorities to ensure a competitive online advertising market."

AT&T senior executive vice president of external and legislative affairs Jim Cicconi said on Sunday that Google would be in a position to pick winners and losers in the industry.

"If Google becomes the dominant force in terms of Web advertising and becomes the broker, that would be clear evidence of market power and dominant position." Cicconi said.

Industry analysts said the deal would let Google focus more attention on extending its advertising forces offline - into the print, television and radio advertising arena.

Google said on Sunday it landed a deal to sell a portion of the advertising inventory for top U.S. radio conglomerate Clear Channel Communications Inc.'s radio division.

Earlier, it landed a similar deal to sell TV ads for No. 2 U.S. satellite television provider EchoStar Communications Corp.

Shortly after announcing the deal on Friday, Google Chief Executive Eric Schmidt said in a news conference he expected the deal to be approved by regulators.

"This is a very, very competitive market in terms of the number of choices," Schmidt said to reporters and analysts on Friday in a conference call.

Time Warner Inc. is also seen urging regulators to scrutinize the deal, according to a report on the Wall Street Journal Web site. Time Warner was not immediately reachable.

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